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ABSTRACT

Charter schools are publicly financed schools that are governed by teachers, parents, administrators, or others who want to create and manage an innovative public school. This document briefly defines charter schools and provides an overview of their history. It also discusses the stance toward charter schools taken by President Clinton, who recognizes the benefits of developing public school-choice programs. Section 10301 of the new Improving America's Schools Act seeks to increase national understanding of the charter-schools model by providing financial assistance for the design and initial implementation of charter schools. Other federal funds, including Goals 2000 and School-to-Work, may be used by states and communities to support charter schools. The first grants to be awarded under the charter-schools startup grant program were awarded in March 1996. The document briefly describes 10 charter schools across the United States and offers tips on how to expand public-school choice and charter schools and how to improve individual public schools. A list of state contacts for charter schools is included. (LMI)

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A Look at Charter Schools

A Background Paper for the U.S. Department of Education's
Satellite Town Meeting
March 19, 1996

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What is a Charter School?

A charter school is a public school that is governed by teachers, parents, administrators, or others who want to create and manage an innovative public school. The developers of a charter school apply to a public agency -- usually a local school board or state board of education, but in some cases a public university -- for a charter that provides public funding and a performance contract to run a public school. The school's performance is reviewed after three to five years, and the school remains open only as long as it meets or exceeds performance benchmarks established in its charter.

Success for charter schools -- and the continuation of their charters -- depends on success for students.

Charter schools must be authorized by state law, and differences in these laws lead to different types of charter schools from state to state. But charter schools across the country do share some general features. Those governing a charter school are often given control of their school's budget, staffing, teaching methods, structure of the school day, and curriculum. In exchange for this autonomy, charter schools are held accountable for results. They are accountable for the performance benchmarks established in their charter, and for how well students meet local or state academic standards. Moreover, they stay open as long as they attract students and their families to the school.

Charter schools are public schools, and they are publicly financed. Up to the full per-pupil allotment for each student follows the student to the charter school. Along with funding comes the responsibilities of a public school. Like other public schools, they are open to all students. Charter schools may not charge tuition or have any religious affiliation. Generally, they may not limit admissions based on measures of achievement or aptitude. And they must comply with civil rights, health and safety, and special education laws.

Supporters see charter schools as a promising way to raise academic standards, empower educators, involve parents and communities, and expand choice and accountability in public education.

Charter Schools -- A Brief History

The idea of a state legislature freeing up teachers and teachers who wanted to establish another option in public education, was originally proposed by the California Alternative School Association, LEARN, in 1985. In 1989, Minnesota Democratic State Senator Ember Reichgott decided to promote the concept of charter schools in order to expand Minnesota's pioneering effort in public school choice. Senator Reichgott and others convinced the 1991 Legislature to permit establishment of up to eight charter schools. The 1993 Minnesota Legislature increased that number to 20, and then 35 in 1994.

The charter school legislation in Minnesota sought to increase student achievement and graduation rates, and encourage school districts to improve their education programs. The legislation stressed accountability for results, new opportunities for educators to create the kinds of schools they thought could help students learn and succeed, and authorized new organizations to establish the public charter schools.

In 1993, California became the nation's second state to pass a charter schools law with strong leadership from California state senator Gary Hart. The law authorizes up to 100 charter schools, and more charter schools are now up and running in California than in any other state in the country.

Nationwide, more than 200 charter schools are up and running, and more have been given charters to begin operation this fall. Twenty-one states have passed charter school laws, with almost half of these enacted in the last year. So far, most of the charter schools are concentrated in 6 states: California, Minnesota, Colorado, Michigan, Massachusetts, and Arizona.

President Clinton and Charter Schools

President Clinton has long recognized the benefits of public school choice and of providing schools with flexibility in exchange for accountability for results. As part of his efforts to support and reform public education, he is supporting grass-roots efforts to establish high-quality charter schools around the country.

In 1993, the President proposed a program to provide start-up funds for charter schools around the country. Enacted in 1994 as part of the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act, this program is now providing start-up funds to charter schools in 11 states. The law enacting the program states that "parent and student choice among public schools can assist in promoting comprehensive education reform and give more students the opportunity to learn to challenging state content standards and challenging state performance standards, if sufficiently diverse and high-quality choices, and genuine opportunities to take advantage of such choices, are available to all students..."

Moreover, the U.S. Department of Education is also funding the nation's most comprehensive national study on charter schools. The four-year study will provide important information about how well charter schools are doing, and about the challenges they face.

Other federal funds, including those provided under the Goals 2000: Educate America Act and the School to Work Opportunities Act, may be used by states and communities to support charter schools For example, Minnesota, Massachusetts, and Michigan are using Goals 2000 funds to support charter schools and to facilitate the sharing of lessons learned in those schools. In addition, the Department of Education is using broad waiver authority to provide maximum flexibility in the use of federal funds to help charter schools tailor the use of federal program resources to meet the needs of their students.

In his recent State of the Union Address, President Clinton asked all states to let teachers and others form charter schools. Since then, he has proposed a major expansion of his charter schools start-up program to support the development of quality charter schools across the nation.[1]

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[1] The President has requested $40 million for the program in FY 1997, a $34 million increase over current funding. While the Congress is still debating the education appropriations bill for FY 1996, the Senate and House have both approved a portion of the President's requested increase.

A Look at Charter Schools: Ten Examples

- The **O'Farrell Community School** was converted from a relatively new school in the San Diego school district to a charter school in 1993. The school comprises 1,400 students grades 6-8, and is divided into schools-within-schools or "families" of about 160 students and 6 teachers each. O'Farrell is truly embedded in the community, through a rich set of partnerships with parents, local businesses, universities, and social service agencies. Students present their work for parents and community members during open houses like the one you will see this afternoon. The school also provides one computer for every five students, and -- working with Cox Cable, Apple Corporation's Christopher Columbus Consortium, and San Diego University -- makes effective use of computers and educational technology across the curriculum.

- **Vaughn Elementary School**, one of California's first charter schools, was converted from an existing school in July 1993. Parents and teachers call this "the little school that could." Indeed, the school has seen significant academic and financial gains in a high-poverty, very diverse community. The school serves 1,200 students, grades K-6, with all students currently eligible for the federal free lunch program and 75 percent speaking a native language other than English. Before the charter was granted, Vaughn was one of the lowest-achieving schools in the Los Angeles school district. After two years of intensive focus on academic restructuring and family involvement, test scores are up dramatically, the school's bilingual program has been successful in accelerating the pace of students becoming proficient in English, and the school's attendance is the best in Los Angeles. The school's dynamic leadership attributes these early successes partly to their ability, as a charter school, to make decisions involving the curriculum, budget, and other major issues.

- **The Accelerated School** is affiliated with the Accelerated Schools project based at Stanford University, and is the only charter school in South-Central Los Angeles. The school was founded by teachers from a nearby school, with the help of a start-up grant from Wells Fargo Bank. Accelerated School emphasizes high expectations for all students. The school works hard to make learning relevant to students, either by connecting learning to the child's life, or to other parts of the curriculum. The school also has active partnerships with California State, Los Angeles, and the South-Central Family Health Center, which provides free immunizations, tuberculosis testing, and other medical care for its students. A USC institute providing entrepreneurial training for small business also works with the school. The school serves 55 students, grades K-5. Earlier this month, the school received impressive results from a standardized math test: student test scores had increased 64 percent over the previous year.

- The **City Academy** became the nation's first charter school to open its doors in September 1992. The school was founded by two teachers who are members of the Minnesota Education Association, in close cooperation with local businesses. The school cites its small size, close teacher/student relationships, and its emphasis on student responsibility as the primary factors that keep students in school. Students praise how much time teachers take with each student, and home visits from teachers to students and their families.

- **Skills for Tomorrow** was founded by a former teacher, with strong support both from the Minnesota Business Partnership and the Teamsters' Service Bureau. The school, begun in January of 1994, is designed to provide better transitions for its students from school to work, and provides internships and classes to students that teach students skills needed to succeed in the workplace.

- **Cedar-Riverside Charter School** was started in a low-income housing project in Minneapolis with help from a local New American Schools Development Corporation (NASDC) project. Involving the

parents -- 90 percent of whom are on public assistance -- in their children's education has been a primary goal of the school, and parental involvement has increased dramatically since they created the school in 1993. The school serves 85 students, K-9, and is adding a new grade every year.

- **Honey Creek Community School** is a school-within-a-school in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It was founded by parents interested in providing an outstanding and personalized education for elementary school students, now serving 40 students Grades 1-3. The school has an intensive focus on technology, using multi-media digital technology and providing regular access to the internet for students and teachers. It also emphasizes project-based learning, teaching children through an inter-disciplinary approach involving music, reading, math, and other subjects.

- **The Johnson/Urban League Charter School** was converted from a San Diego school this fall into a charter school through a partnership between the school, the school district, and the San Diego chapter of the Urban League. The Urban League has recently placed education as one of its top priorities, and as part of these efforts, the local chapter has pushed to open up a school emphasizing high expectations for all students, discipline, teacher training, family involvement, and early, intensive reading for young students. The school is serving 450 students, grades K-6. The school's teachers had 24 days of training this summer to prepare to teach the school's curriculum, and to effectively use technology in the classroom.

- **Deterding Elementary School**, just outside of Sacramento, was converted from an existing public school in 1994 with strong support from the school's staff and local parents. The school serves 620 students, preschool to 6th grade, and places a heavy emphasis on teaching the fine arts and family involvement. Deterding asks parents to spend 20 hours a year in the school, whether through evening or weekend volunteering, or participation in open house presentations of

student work. Last year, more than 500 school parents volunteered a total of 17,000 hours.

- **The New Country School** was established by a planning group composed of 4 local high school teachers and other community members in 1994. The school is utilizing three store fronts on this small town's main street, and serves 94 students, grades 7-12. The teachers provide their services through a teacher-owned cooperative to a local board comprised entirely of teachers and parents. Students perform projects designed by parents, teachers, and the students themselves to teach important academic and job-related skills. For example, the students have already begun one student-run business, and are on the way to creating another. Another project in a biology class received a great deal of attention when students' findings about local frogs highlighted previously unknown environmental problems in the area.

Charter Schools At-A-Glance

What is a Charter School?	A Brief History of Charter Schools	President Clinton & Charter Schools	How Charter Schools Are Working -- 3 Examples
A charter school is a public school under contract or charter to a public agency that is governed by administrators, teachers, parents, and others who want to create and manage an innovative public school.	The idea of a state legislature freeing up teachers who wanted to establish a public alternative to public schools, with parents, was originally proposed by the California Alternative School Association, LEARN, in 1985. A bill proposing this idea was defeated in 1988.	President Clinton has long recognized the benefits of developing public school choice programs. When the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was reauthorized last year, the President advocated and the new bill reflects that "parent and student choice among public schools can assist in promoting comprehensive educational reform. . ."	**The O'Farrell Community School,** is comprised of 1,400 students grades 6-8, and is divided into schools-within-schools or "families" of about 160 students and 6 teachers each. It provides one computer for every five students and makes effective use of technology.
It is a way to make public schools creative, flexible, and responsive to the needs of students and parents. Based on the principle that public education must be expanded to offer more choices for students and parents, charter schools are schools of choice.	The idea gained momentum when state senator, Ember Reichgott (D), decided to promote the charter schools concept. Senator Reichgott and others convinced the 1991 Legislature to permit establishment of up to 8 charter schools. In 1993, California became the nation's second state to pass a charter schools law with strong leadership from California state Senator Gary Hart (D).	Section 10301 of the new Improving America's Schools Act seeks to increase national understanding of the charter schools model by providing financial assistance for the design and initial implementation of charter schools; and by evaluating the effects of such schools. Other federal funds, including Goals 2000 and School-to-Work, may be used by states and communities to support charter schools. Massachusetts and Michigan, for example, are already using Goals 2000 funds to support the development of charter schools.	**Vaughn Elementary School** is one of California's first charter schools. Parents and teachers call this "the little school that could." The school has seen significant academic and financial gains in a high-poverty, very diverse community. After two years, test scores are up dramatically, and the school boast the best attendance record in Los Angeles.

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What is a Charter School?	A Brief History of Charter Schools	President Clinton & Charter Schools	How Charter Schools Are Working -- 3 Examples
The concept of charter schools has been called "one of the most powerful and promising to emerge from the school reform movement of the past decade."	The 1993 Minnesota Legislature increased that number to 20, and then 35 in 1994. ⇨ As of April 1995, more than 200 charter schools had received preliminary approval nationwide, and about 110 were up and running by spring.	President Clinton's 1996 amended budget request for Charter Schools was $20 million.[2] The first grants to be awarded under the charter schools start-up grant program -- the only direct support from the Federal Government exclusively to charter schools, will be awarded this month. They include grants to California, Texas, Colorado, Minnesota, Michigan, Louisiana, Georgia, Arizona, and Massachusetts.	The Accelerated School is the only charter school in South-Central Los Angeles. The school was founded by teachers from a nearby school, with the help of a start-up grant from Wells Fargo Bank. A USC institute providing entrepreneurial training for small business also works with the school. Earlier this month, the school received impressive results from a standardized math test: student test scores had increased 64 percent over the previous year.

[2] The U.S. House of Representatives action provides for $6 million; the Senate Subcommittee would grant $10 million.

TIPS ON MEETING AMERICAN EDUCATION'S CHALLENGES

EXPANDING PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE: STRENGTHENING PUBLIC EDUCATION AS A FOUNDATION OF OUR AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE

This page offers tips on how to expand public school choice and charter schools and improve individual public schools. This is one of the issues that Americans say they want addressed by their schools.

Background: Public charter schools are a promising new vehicle for raising academic standards, empowering educators, involving parents and communities, and expanding choice and accountability in public education. Created and managed by groups of parents, teachers, community groups and others, they can be tailored to meet the needs of a local community. These schools -- now permitted in 20 states -- are public schools freed from most laws and regulations in exchange for accountability for better performance and results. Charter schools are non-sectarian, may not charge tuition, and should be open to all students. Parents and teachers also have additional options for tailoring educational opportunities for children, including public school choice, magnet schools, schools-within-schools, and redesigning and improving individual public schools.

10 Tips to Help Expand Public School Choice and Accountability in Your Community

1. **Families:** Get involved in your children's schools. Find out whether the school is setting high enough academic standards for your child, and whether the school is offering your child the educational opportunities he or she needs to meet the highest standards available in other schools and states. Get together with other families, teachers, community groups, school district staff, and the school's principal to begin to make improvements in your child's school. Join an existing school improvement committee, or help form a new one.

2. **Families:** One size does not fit all. Consider asking the local school district whether you have the option to send your child to another public school. If you do have this option for "public school choice," request information from the school district about all of your available choices. Ask about deadlines for applying, and begin shopping around early.

3. **Families:** If you are shopping around for a public school, write a list of key elements you desire in your child's education. Develop a set of questions you want to ask about the educational opportunities provided by a school for your child. Visit schools, sit down with the principal, stop in classrooms, and talk to teachers and parents at that school.

4. **Families, teachers, principals, and community organizations:** If existing schools don't meet your expectations, consider applying for a charter to create a new public school or convert an existing public school to "charter" status. Twenty states now permit teachers and others to form public charter schools, providing them with public funds and dramatic flexibility to custom-make a local school, while holding the school accountable for results. For a list of states, and people to contact in your state for further information, call 1-800-USA-LEARN.

5. **Families, teachers, principals, and community organizations:** If charter schools may be established in your state, find out the organizations that are authorized by state law to approve applications for charter schools (e.g., local school districts, state boards of education, a public university). Contact those organizations, ask for information about developing a charter school application, and request recommendations of people who have experience in developing a charter school. Find out whether your state permits only conversions of existing public schools or also permits the creation of new charter schools.

6. **School boards and states:** Review regulations and red tape and eliminate any that get in the way of schools trying to meet the needs of their students and help them meet challenging local and state standards. Provide assistance to all schools to enhance the quality of teaching and raise levels of learning for all students. Help regular public schools and public charter schools to improve and help them develop reliable performance standards by which schools are held accountable.

7. **School districts and states:** Promote public school choice and charter schools in a way that preserves public schooling and raises academic standards for all children. Develop helpful information for teachers, parents, and others who want to custom-make a local public school to better help all students meet high academic standards. Provide relevant and understandable information about all public schools where families may send their children. Develop an effective

process for reviewing applications for charter schools, and approve those that will have sound fiscal management and real promise to help all children learn. Ensure that transportation is available for students seeking to attend other public or charter schools. Provide adequate autonomy for charter and other public schools. Host conferences or seminars on charter school issues for potential applicants, existing charter schools, and their community partners. Raise awareness and conduct outreach to inform people of opportunities to form charter schools.

8. **Families, teachers, principals, community organizations, colleges and universities:** Recognize the importance of significant advance planning before submitting an application to form a charter school or making fundamental changes in an existing school. This enterprise is not easy; it takes time, energy, commitment, and considerable knowledge about teaching, learning, and management.

9. **Families, teachers, principals, community organizations, colleges, universities, and businesses:** Develop skills in building consensus, developing a shared vision, budgeting, contracting and financial management needed to manage a successful charter school, magnet school, or site-based managed school. Businesses, local colleges and universities, school districts, and others can help identify and develop these skills. Teachers, principals, and parents must work to develop these skills quickly and effectively to manage successful schools.

10. **Families, teachers, principals, community organizations, colleges, and universities:** Think about other critical issues in creating a school that improves teaching and learning for all. These include: decide that you are prepared to invest the time and energy needed; develop a consensus on your goals and vision for the school; decide if you want your school to have a specialized educational focus such as math and science, foreign languages, the arts, or preparation for the workplace; talk to and visit others involved in high-performing schools or who have successfully started a charter or magnet school; discuss what will be the nature of your curriculum, how time within the school day will be organized, how student learning will be assessed, where the school will be located if it is a new school, what will be the governance structure of the school, and by what performance measures the school will be held accountable.

Selected Resources: Contact one of the national organizations listed below for additional information and ideas to consider as you develop a charter school. Or call 1-800-USA-LEARN for a list of states with charter school laws, and contact names and telephone numbers in your state. And contact your local school district or state board of education for additional information.

In the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) of 1994, President Clinton proposed and Congress enacted a competition for start-up funds for charter schools through the U.S. Department of Education, typically providing between $30,000 and $60,000 of "venture capital" annually for up to three years. The President is proposing substantial increases in this start-up fund. Also, school districts and states may use Goals 2000: Educate America Act funds to support efforts to redesign and improve public schools and to establish charter schools. IASA contains major financial support for efforts to raise the quality of teaching and improve schools across the country.

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CHARTER SCHOOL CONTACT SHEETS

(Pages 1-2 have contacts for U.S. Department of Education)
(Pages 3-8 have contacts for charter schools, by state)

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OR John Fiegel, Public Charter Schools Program (see above)

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For Departmental Documents and General Information on Charter Schools

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